

A Cultural Cognition Perspective on Religion Singularity: How Political Identity Influences Religious Affiliation

A Position Paper by

Kevin S. Seybold,
Grove City College

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In this case, the author was asked to answer the following question: Assuming the "religion singularity" phenomenon is, in fact, occurring in institutional Christianity today, what do you believe is the primary cause(s) for this phenomenon's occurrence?

Abstract: Kenneth Howard argues in his paper, "The Religion Singularity," that institutional Christianity has experienced and will continue to experience an increase in the number of denominations and individual worship centers, which, along with a slower increase in the number of Christians in the US, will make institutional Christianity unsustainable in its current form. While there are, no doubt, many reasons why this religion singularity has or will take place, this paper examines the role of cultural cognition on the trends reported in Howard's article. Cultural commitments and values, such as group membership and identity, influence the position individuals take on a variety of religious and political topics, which can then lead to polarization on these issues within the broader society. While we might expect that religious affiliations play an important role in determining a person's political views, this article seeks to identify whether the reverse is also true, namely the extent to which political views affect an individual's religious affiliation. This article reviews research that suggests the increasing political polarization in the United States over the past few decades has contributed, along with other factors, to the religion singularity reported by Howard.

Keywords: Cultural Cognition, Religion Singularity, Politics, Group Identity, Ideology, Polarization

KENNETH HOWARD'S ARTICLE ON the "religion singularity" describes demographic trends that he argues will make "institutional Christianity unsustainable in its current forms."¹ These trends include a rapid increase in the number of denominations and individual worship centers along with a steady but slower increase in the number of Christians globally. A religion singularity occurred once the increase in worship centers and denominations exceeded the increase in number of new Christians. Howard argues that, along with the rising number of "nones" and religiously unaffiliated in the United States, this differential will drive the congregational size of denominations and worship centers down to potentially unsustainable levels by the end of the

¹ Kenneth W. Howard, "The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity," *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 7, no. 2 (2017): 90, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v07i02/77-93>.

twenty-first century.² According to Howard's analysis of the data, institutional Christianity will have to adjust if it expects to survive in a healthy form in the years to come.

If Howard is accurate and a religion singularity has occurred (or will soon take place), what might account for these patterns that threaten institutional Christianity? Specifically, why was there such an increase in denominational fragmentation, from 9,300 to 34,200 (according to Howard's data) during the second half of the twentieth century?³ In the social sciences, there frequently exists many potential causes for a particular phenomenon, and there are likely several factors driving the singularity trend Howard identifies. The purpose of this position paper is to examine the religion singularity from the perspective of cultural cognition, which refers to processes whereby cultural commitments and values (e.g. group membership and identity) influences the position a person adopts on a particular issue, such as gun control, climate change, same-sex marriage, etc. These cultural commitments act as a type of heuristic framework through which individuals assess data in order to form their opinions. In the context of religion singularity, perhaps growth in the number of denominations and worship centers over the past few decades is attributable to the increased political and religious polarization of the US population. We can conceptualize denominations and worship centers as social institutions that provide an individual with a sense of social identity. If people are making decisions about which religious group they will join on the basis of political (as well as religious) orientation, then the fragmentation and increasing number of denominations and centers of worship might actually reflect the increasing political polarization found in the United States. In other words, religious sorting occurs because partisans may select into politically like-minded social groups.⁴

Many factors can contribute to our sense of group identity, such as national, ethnic, and religious groups.⁵ As social beings, humans need to affiliate with others for survival. Over the course of human history, the size of these groups has increased from small hunter-gathering groups to large nation states. Our minds evolved, in part, to facilitate the formation and maintenance of tribal in-groups; our brains are built for tribal life.⁶ Certain cognitive processes function to differentiate the in-group ("us") from the out-group ("them"). As a result, we tend to accept the reliability of new information only if it is consistent with what we already believe to be true (a "biased assimilation" or "confirmation bias"). We also view beliefs held by our in-group as being objective and correct while beliefs held by out-groups as biased and erroneous ("naïve realism"), and we automatically dismiss evidence presented by the out-group before fully considering it ("reactive devaluation"). These biases in information processing are examples of motivated reasoning or cognition—the tendency of individuals to conform their evaluation of data in order to remain consistent with a stated goal or purpose that is oftentimes unrelated to factual accuracy.⁷ Regularly, that goal or purpose is to be consistent with the thinking of the in-group.

² Howard, "The Religion Singularity," 77.

³ Ibid., 82.

⁴ Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 200, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226555812.001.0001>.

⁵ Andrew L. Whitehead and Christopher P. Scheitle, "We the (Christian) People: Christianity and American Identity from 1996 to 2014," *Social Currents* 5, no. 2 (2018): 157–72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2329496517725333>.

⁶ Joshua D. Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 69.

⁷ Kevin S. Seybold, *Questions in the Psychology of Religion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 175.

Religious denominations or worship centers can function as an in-group for its members.⁸ We might expect that religion plays an important role in determining a person's views on the political issues of the day, even influencing an individual's choice of membership in a particular political party. Hence, the religious group I belong to (my denomination and/or worship center) might affect the political party with which I affiliate. Indeed, religion trails only race as an indicator of political partisanship.⁹ However, does a person's political identification affect an individual's religious affiliation, as well? Paul Djupe and his colleagues provide evidence for politics influencing religious association in their studies on the relationship between politics and religious disaffiliation.¹⁰ These authors found that when political and religious identities are at odds with each other, politics (not religion) wins out. If congregants disagree with their church's position on a political issue (e.g. LGBTQ rights) and this issue becomes salient within the entire congregation (i.e. church leadership takes a position on the issue), then congregants are more likely to leave the religious organization, especially if they only marginally identify with the religious organization.¹¹ Political involvement of churches can, therefore, precipitate the loss of members when those members disagree with the congregational leadership as a whole.

In one of the first studies to investigate the role that politics plays in religious affiliation, Michael Hout and Claude Fischer found that the religiously tinged politics of the 1990s contributed to politically moderate and liberal congregants abandoning their religious attachments.¹² The authors argue that this is one factor that has contributed to the 30-year rise of the religiously unaffiliated ("nones"), which now comprises about 25% of the US population, according to recent surveys.¹³ These "nones" are typically not atheists or secularists. What defines them is their "avoidance of churches" where they choose a religious affiliation (or lack thereof), at least in part, on the basis of their political views.¹⁴ Stratos Patrikios also found that some religious believers modify their church attendance because of politics. Religiosity, according to Patrikios, is an unstable choice for many individuals, and this choice is open to

⁸ Darren M. Slade, "Religious Homophily and Biblicalism: A Theory of Conservative Church Fragmentation," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 9, no. 1 (2019): 13–28, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v09i01/13-28>.

⁹ Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews*, 22.

¹⁰ Paul A. Djupe, Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Kimberly H. Conger, "Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked to State Rates of the Nonreligious? The Importance of Salient Controversy," *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2018): 910–22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1065912918771526>; Paul A. Djupe, Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Anand E. Sokhey, "Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion: The Importance of Affiliation," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 1 (2018): 161–75, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12308>.

¹¹ Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock, "The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research," *Sociological Science* 4 (November 2017): 697, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15195/v4.a28>; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger, "Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked," 910–22; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey, "Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion," 161–75.

¹² Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations," *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (April 2002): 179, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3088891>.

¹³ Cf. Robert P. Jones et al., *Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back* (Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2016), 2, <https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PRRI-RNS-Unaffiliated-Report.pdf>.

¹⁴ Hout and Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference," 175.

secular influences, including those of a political nature.¹⁵ Ultimately, political party identification provides a strong sense of belonging to a social in-group, and the ideology and partisanship within the party “may be able to ‘construct’ religious communities, by boosting movement within and perhaps eventually across these communities.”¹⁶ Political factors, consequently, might contribute to the rapid growth in the number of denominations and worship centers as documented by Howard.¹⁷ Patrikios summarizes his findings, “Worshiping in a theologically conservative church seems to eventually function – at least in part – as a symbolic expression of conservatism and Republican partisanship.” He speculates further, “The long-term consequence of this political religion could lead to an ideological and partisan sorting-out within politicized churches.”¹⁸

Are the worship centers discussed in Howard’s article politicized? Howard does acknowledge that megachurches are more likely to be conservative than progressive by which he probably means they are more likely *theologically* conservative.¹⁹ Barney Warf and Morton Winsberg point out that megachurches tend to be located in small Southern counties where a large percentage of the population already attends church. Although often surrounded by more Democratic metropolitan regions, these counties tend to be politically conservative. Warf and Winsberg postulate a bi-directional association between megachurches and their political environment, whereby voting patterns are influenced by the conservative political perspectives found in these megachurches.²⁰ While not a direct measurement of political influence on religious affiliation, Warf and Winsberg’s analysis of megachurch geographies is consistent with the proposal that people’s political identity influences their religious choices—first, whether to attend church at all; and second, if attending, which religious group to join.

Michele Margolis in her recent book, *From Politics to the Pews*, provides longitudinal data to support her thesis that political motivations drive religious belief, behavior, and belonging.²¹ Here, the term “God gap” is used to describe the fact that the more devoutly religious tend to belong to the Republican Party while the less devout are Democrats. This trend began in the 1970s and 1980s and continues today, exemplified by the white evangelical voting bloc. Why is there a close connection between religiosity and political membership? Conventional wisdom suggests that Americans rely on their religious identities to form their political judgments; they align their political identities with their preexisting religious identities.²² However, Margolis argues that people also align their religious involvement with their political perspectives. In other words, political partisans select into or out of religious communities based on their political outlook. They find themselves, therefore, in “politically homogeneous social networks.”²³ Once embedded in these homogeneous in-groups, they are exposed only to political views (as well as theological perspectives) that are consistent with the in-group. Thus, the church becomes a type of echo chamber “populated by like-minded

¹⁵ Stratos Patrikios, “American Republican Religion? Disentangling the Causal Link Between Religion and Politics in the US,” *Political Behavior* 30, no. 3 (2008): 371, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9053-1>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 386.

¹⁷ Howard, “The Religion Singularity,” 77–93.

¹⁸ Patrikios, “American Republican Religion?,” 386.

¹⁹ Howard, “The Religion Singularity,” 89.

²⁰ Barney Warf and Morton Winsberg, “Geographies of Megachurches in the United States,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 27, no. 1 (2010): 42, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08873631003593216>.

²¹ Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews*.

²² *Ibid.*, 35–37.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

partisans.”²⁴ While this homogeneity increases the bond within a group, it can also foster political and religious animosity toward the “other” (i.e. those not part of the in-group).²⁵

How might this alignment of religious identity with political identity look developmentally? When might this alignment take place? To answer this question, Margolis utilizes a life-cycle theory of religion. Here, religion is typically a peripheral concern for adolescents and young adults, but other aspects of identity, such as political outlook, become much more salient during these years. When adults begin to reconsider their religious involvement, generally once they have school-aged children living at home, their religious affiliation (or disaffiliation) is driven by their already established political identifications. The longitudinal data provided by Margolis support this hypothesis. Political partisanship plays a role when religious engagement decisions are made during this portion of the religious life cycle. The empirical data show that religiosities between Republicans and Democrats diverged (the “God gap”) once people had school-aged children at home.²⁶ Republicans tended to affiliate with a religious group and adopt a religious identity while Democrats generally did not.

All of these studies suggest that political and religious ideologies shape an individual’s identity, and identity automatically leads to an “us” versus “them” differentiation. Mason argues that what “liberals” and “conservatives” dislike about each other is the “otherness” of one’s identity opponent (the out-group), and it is this preference for one’s in-group and dislike of the out-group that drives the polarization seen along political and religious lines in the US today.²⁷ The complex interplay of politics and religion is again shown in the results of a study by Whitehead and his colleagues, which found that voting behavior (in this case, voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election) was a function of a variety of factors, including anti-Black prejudice, negative attitudes toward immigration, derogatory views of Islam, and white Christian Nationalism (which the authors define as a set of beliefs that link being an American with being a Christian). These Trump supporters also saw similarities between the United States and the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, which coincides with their strong defense of America’s perceived Christian heritage. The authors found that while political conservatism, party affiliation, and evangelical Protestant religion were correlated with voting behavior, the more robust predictor was the related but distinct factor of white Christian Nationalism.²⁸

Studies like these warn against causal oversimplification by attributing political behavior predominantly to religious affiliation. Many reasons might be given for the “religion singularity” trend noted in Howard’s article. The role of cultural cognition discussed here is only one of many possibilities. Nevertheless, the implications of the religion singularity are significant and will lead, Howard proposes, to a transformation of institutional Christianity altogether. While the absolute number of Christians in the US continues to rise, that increase is

²⁴ Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews*, 6.

²⁵ Slade, “Religious Homophily and Biblicalism,” 13–28.

²⁶ Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews*, 99.

²⁷ Lilliana Mason, “Ideologues Without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. S1 (2018): 880–85, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfy005>.

²⁸ Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, “Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2018): 147–71, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx070>. See also, Brian D. McLaren, “Conditions for the Great Religion Singularity,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 40–49, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no1.05>.

surpassed by the number of denominations and/or individual worship centers. Many factors no doubt influence the increasing number of worship centers in America. The literature reviewed in this paper suggests that among these factors is political partisanship. People affiliate with a particular denomination or worship center, in part, because of a perceived similarity between the individual's political identity and the political orientation of their congregation. People are selecting their religious identities on the basis of politics. As the United States has become more politically polarized over the past few decades, this polarization has likely contributed to the acceleration in denominational divisions and worship centers that make up the religion singularity. From the perspective of cultural cognition, group memberships and other cultural commitments influence the position a person takes on various issues. The work of Margolis and others described above suggests that it is often the cultural commitments of political membership and identity that influence religious perspectives and affiliations. If these authors' interpretation of the data is accurate, then the religion singularity and the rise in denominations and worship centers goes beyond religion *per se* to include other cultural forces, not the least of which is political partisanship.

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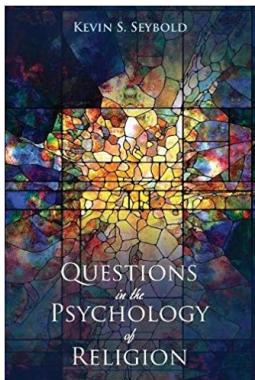
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

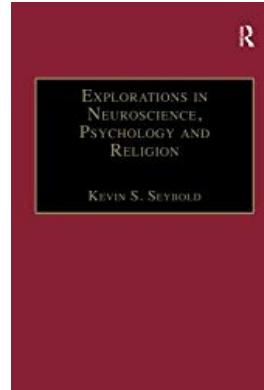
Kevin S. Seybold is professor of psychology at Grove City College where he teaches courses in behavioral neuroscience, cognition, and the psychology of religion. A graduate of Greenville College (B.A.) and Marquette University (M.A.), he received his Ph.D. in physiological psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Seybold has published articles in *Physiology & Behavior*, the *International Journal of Neuroscience, Biological Psychiatry, Current Directions in Psychological Science*, the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, and the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* among others. He is the author of *Explorations in Neuroscience, Psychology and Religion* (2007) and *Questions in the Psychology of Religion* (2017).

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